

# Montessori beyond the

**Helen Lerebours** works alongside families who home educate their children, and here she reveals how the Montessori philosophy can play a role throughout this community.

**H**ome education is not something I ever contemplated getting involved with. In all honesty, I even saw home educating as quite an extreme thing to do. I had questions about the child's independence and how anyone could earn a living when home educating.

But I wanted to learn more because I had concerns about my local schools and my favoured option was for my son to attend a Montessori school. Changing where we lived wasn't an option as we had done it so many times already and being far from family and friends had proved too difficult.

After years of moving around to follow work, we had settled in Manchester where our friends and family live. Being a Montessori teacher in the Manchester area was initially a tricky and frustrating experience for me as I am a non-driver and there just aren't many Montessori schools around.

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I even tried opening a nursery of my own, but finding suitable and affordable premises where we live isn't easy. After a few years of focussing on my own nursery, I accepted it just wasn't feasible and wouldn't be the right thing to do for our family.

Admittedly, there have been times when I have thought of changing careers but Montessori forms part of who I am now and I care far too much about it to ever let it go.

I am also a big believer in that things happen for a reason, so I am confident that those efforts will play some part in our future.

Luckily, I had become friends with some wonderful families in Manchester with an interest in Montessori. My son and I would attend various parent and child groups and bump into the same people. We went to a lovely forest school group every week, and it was

here plans were hatched.

As there is such a lack of alternative education in Manchester, families looking for something else seem to attract one another. Some of these families had been involved with the Montessori Manchester free school application and were using aspects of the philosophy in how they educated their children.

We chatted a few times about starting a Montessori session, especially as I am a qualified teacher and had all of the equipment we would need – another positive which came out of trying to set up a nursery.

I began Montessori sessions at the Parsonage Gardens in Didsbury in the autumn of 2013. I started with a three-hour session, once a week, for children aged 3 to 6 years-old. Two children attended the first session in October with their mums and it was lovely.

After years of finding the perfect trays in charity shops and filling my home with boxes of jugs, I could

finally unwrap them and lay them out ready for children to use.

My son, Sacha, has had access to Montessori activities since he was born, and also came along. He was just under three when we started and did find it difficult to share his Mummy sometimes. Now he comes along each week and it has been a joy sharing this with him.

The sessions progressed with word-of-mouth proving the biggest method of advertisement. Before I knew it, the session was full and attracting families from all over Manchester.

Going from strength to strength, I have made new equipment such as timelines and continually enhance the areas with cards, objects and books.

I also started an afternoon session and accepted children as old as nine years old and as young as two years, at first not knowing how a nine year-old



*Sacha (above) has had access to Montessori activities since he was born*

would interact with the environment. The Roman Arch was her first challenge as well as the Trinomial Cube, and she has found endless interest in some of the Practical life and Sensorial activities.

It has been wonderful seeing children of different ages and stages using the equipment together. There has been a

great amount of work creating levers, mazes and marble runs with the Sensorial equipment and a project unfolded about Electricity. Sometimes children would take materials home with them, and developing an equipment library is something I would love to do.

The session runs as a normal Montessori environment, with some parents coming and getting involved with their children's activities, while others prefer to read, crochet or quietly chat.

When families begin the sessions, I always have a chat with the parents as well as welcoming the children, and tell them about some of the guidelines for the environment. This has improved with time, as now I have a clearer idea of how the environment works with both parents and children being involved.

# classroom



When we have birthday celebrations, it's a particularly special moment with the parents involved as it is lovely to see them reminisce about their child's life. I admit to having a tear in my eye as it's easy to form close relationships with both adult and child.

Unusually for home education sessions, families commit to coming along to my sessions termly but it is something that works well. It has not only created a core group of children that attend sessions – growing and learning together and forming strong friendships – but it has also allowed for parents to meet each week and form their own friendships.

I hadn't envisaged how a group with parents coming along would work, but it has now become as important to me as the children's learning. We've started a parent's discussion group every Tuesday evening and it feels such a natural progression.

The Parenting Facilitator training, which I attended last year, laid a foundation for this idea. Parents decide what we cover over a seven-week period, with a focus on how Montessori can be used in the home. I also plan to include a small workshop on how to

make Montessori cards and share tips on how to arrange the child's toys in the home.

When families first join the session, I usually chat with the parents and ask the question: "Why home education?" For some it has been a natural choice but for others it has been something they've felt they needed to do because of how their children have coped with school.

I was shocked, for example, when one parent told me that her son's reading lessons were timed and that if he didn't finish a page before the timer alarm went off, he wouldn't be allowed to finish his reading. As her son didn't cope well with this method of teaching, this and other reasons led to her decision to home educate.

To me, the Montessori philosophy of education is a way of life – I certainly have been applying it outside of the classroom since having my son.

Whether it's at mealtimes, walking, shopping or car journeys, I use the principles and the foundations of Montessori philosophy throughout our day.

This is also the approach taken by many of the families that come along: Montessori as part of everyday life.

Through the use of social networking websites and blogs, there are wonderful ideas that can be adapted and used in the home which don't cost the earth.

The setting for my sessions has certainly been a big contributor to their success. The Old Parsonage and its gardens are simply beautiful, including a small wooded area, an alpine garden and beautiful mature trees.

During the springtime, we would visit a Laburnum tree to see what insects had made it their home. The life cycle of the ladybird unfolded before us each week and it was a wonderful learning experience not just for the children but for adults too.

One day, our work cycle was

interrupted by the whirring of chainsaws – tree surgeons were cutting down a dead holly tree. The tree surgeons gave us some of the tree to explore and explained to the children how they climb the tree using special shoes with claws and how the bark would be chopped up, chipped and used to make fuel.

They were sensitive to the children's curiosity, and this could not have been a better lesson in woodland care and management.

I will continue to run these sessions and hopefully open another room so that the session can accommodate more families. Some children will come all day and have the opportunity to 'float' between rooms, with more activities aimed at aged six and over due to the growing demand for this age group.

We have been fortunate enough to have a Reggio Emilia school open nearby recently and I've been working alongside them to develop their school. As of next year, I will also be running a Montessori session there for children to attend without their parents. This won't suit everybody, but it gives parents that opportunity.

My experience with parents has helped so much with my own practice. I strongly believe that reflecting on our teaching is crucial in providing the optimum learning environment for the children.

I've also changed my perception of home education – I once thought it quite extreme, but now living in a suburb of Manchester where primary schools have enormous intakes and where families feel the individual child has been lost sight of, I understand.

When I hear some of their stories, I definitely understand. Gaining a wider understanding of Montessori education and passing on this passion will always be important to me.

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